

Fully Christmas - Hopefully

As I was getting ready for this series, I was thinking about how easily Christmas seems to sneak up on us. I don't know if you are ready for it. But no doubt many of us over the next couple of weeks are going to be at Christmas parties, having dinner with family and friends, celebrating the season. It's the time for trimming trees and stringing lights and drinking hot chocolate and setting up the nativity scene. It's a time when we sing more and we pray for peace on earth.

Christmas is *called* the most wonderful time of the year. Yet it's a well documented fact that people struggle more with discouragement and depression during the holidays than at any other time of the year. One survey reported that forty five percent of all Americans dread it because it's a reminder of an absent loved one, a lost job, a painful divorce, or unrealized dreams as one more year passes by.

So what can get us through holiday blues? It all comes down to *hope*. Hope is an essential element of a full life as a believer - the kind of life Jesus wants for us. Proverbs 13:12 says, "*Hope deferred makes the heart sick...*" We need hope.

Dr. Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist who was in the Auschwitz prison camp during World War II, looked closely at what it might be that enabled some people to survive that ultimate cruelty while others did not. He wrote down his observations in a book called Man's Search for Meaning. Listen to what he says about the power of hope: "The prisoner who had lost faith in the future, his future was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future he also lost his spiritual hold. He let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay." Hope is a powerful force in the human heart. But it can also dissipate quickly.

Now I'm not talking about optimism where you try to pump yourself up about the future. If things aren't okay, it's not an effective strategy to just act like they are. Optimism can't cut it, but true and lasting hope is available to everyone as a result of a personal, intimate relationship with Jesus.

Because Jesus was so much more than a baby born two thousand years ago to a poor family on the outskirts of nowhere. There's something very different about the Christ child. When you discover those differences you'll be surprised by hope.

Seven hundred years before Jesus was born, a prophet declared the qualities of a coming Savior. Look at what he said in Isaiah 9:6: "*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*"

These four characteristics describe the coming Savior - Yeshua Hamashiach - Jesus Christ. Jesus was the child who was born; the Son who was given. And when you put faith in him by believing these characteristics, you'll be filled with hope. So let's take a look at them.

The first characteristic that Isaiah proclaimed was wonderful counselor. Jesus as my counselor reveals something about God in Christ **1. Jesus as Counselor** - that means **He Cares About Me**.

In that phrase "wonderful counselor," the Hebrew word translated as "wonderful" is pala, which means, "something uncommon or out of the ordinary." "a phenomenon lying outside the realm of human explanation; separated from the normal course of events." His abilities go beyond human explanation; beyond human wisdom. Everything about his coming is beyond explanation. God came and was born as a human being that would live with us and then pay the price for sin by dying on the cross. That was the greatest act of love and caring ever demonstrated - beyond any human abilities.

He's a counselor - a counselor is someone we can talk to about anything. A counselor is there to help us make decisions. A counselor helps us confirm our direction for our lives. A counselor helps get us back on track, when we have lost our proper direction. And Jesus Christ is our Wonderful Counselor; He doesn't make mistakes like the rest of us.

Romans 5:8 says, "*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*" Jesus came as the embodiment of God's unconditional love. God cares about you and me and all of us.

You've heard John 3:16 so many times. So let me read it from the Amplified Bible that tries to translate word meaning completely - it says "*For God so greatly loved and dearly prized the world that He [even] gave up His only begotten (unique) Son, so that whoever believes in (trusts in, clings to, relies on) Him shall not perish (come to destruction, be lost) but have eternal (everlasting) life. For God did not send the Son into the world in order to judge*

(to reject, to condemn, to pass sentence on) the world, but that the world might find salvation and be made safe and sound through him."

Jesus came to save you and me, but Jesus didn't just come and die so that you and I could get to heaven. Jesus did it so we could get to God here and now; so we could have his counsel here and now. The God of the universe wants to be with you. God cares about you. God loves you.

But God has given you free choice, so how you respond is still your choice. Jesus is a Wonderful Counselor. Not a wonderful dictator. You can accept or reject his counsel, but wouldn't you be foolish to reject the counsel of someone who's so qualified to guide you and who loves you so much?

God's love for you is so enormous and amazing - let me try to make a comparison. Go with me on this for a second. Here's a picture of two of the planets in our solar system. Look at the size of the earth compared to Jupiter. It's a pretty significant difference.

Now look at the size of Jupiter in comparison to our sun. Pretty dramatic. That's how massive the sun is. It's almost incomprehensible isn't it? You can fit nine hundred sixty thousand planets the size of the earth into our sun. It's almost incomprehensible.

But it's like a Ginsu knife commercial - it gets better! Look at the size of the sun compared to the size of the star Arcturus. You could fit seventeen thousand five hundred of our suns into Arcturus. That's how massive Arcturus is.

But it gets better than that! Look at Arcturus in comparison to Antares. It's mind blowing. And these huge stars are just tiny specks in the enormity of the universe.

God's love is bigger than the universe. God loves you more than the largest of the largest of the largest. His love for you is more vast than the two hundred and twenty five billion galaxies that we know of. It's so vast it's incomprehensible, humanly speaking.

God loves you the whole universe and beyond. So when you believe in the enormity of God's love for you and the intensity of his wanting to be with you, to be your friend, to care for you, to be your counselor, how can you not hope?

The second quality Isaiah uses to describe the coming Savior is **2. Jesus as Mighty God** - That means, **He is in Control**. Jesus as the mighty God is in ultimate control of all things. God is omniscient and sovereign. Nothing that happens is outside of God's knowledge or outside of God's control. Whatever happens in my life or your life, he's aware of it and God's working in you and behind the scenes.

Don't misunderstand me. Jesus doesn't cause the bad and ugly things in life. Most of those come straight out of our failures, imperfections and sins. The rest COULD be prevented if we were as close to God as God meant for us to be. But God uses all of the things that happen in our life to try to grow our faith and mature our character into the image of Christ. James 1:2-4 says, *"Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing."*

Peter alludes to the same idea in 1 Peter 1:6-7. Remember Peter's writing to Christians dealing with Nero and some of the most sadistic, intense, cruel persecution that Christians have ever experienced. Even in times like that, Peter says that there's joy and hope in what's coming. He says, *"...there is wonderful joy ahead, even though you have to endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world."* So no matter what is happening in your life you can be confident that Jesus as the mighty God is in ultimate control and can bring good out of any situation if we remain faithful and loving.

The Bible tells us in Colossians 1:17 *"...in him (Jesus) all things hold together."*

Those words there "hold together" mean that Jesus is literally holding everything together. If you're trying to hold things together yourself; if you're saying, I have to handle that myself, that's not an effective long-range strategy, or even a good short-range one. Just put everything at his feet - trust in who he is; in his character. He's caring and loving and he is mighty. He's got your back. That's why 1 Peter 5:7 says, *"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you ..."*

Will you? Or will you resist him?

The third characteristic Isaiah used to describe the coming Savior is **3. Jesus as Everlasting Father** - That means, **His Promises Can Be Counted On**. Isaiah is highlighting the divine nature of the Messiah, that he isn't a creation of God, but that he is God - Emmanuel - God with us. So what he says is God speaking directly to us. That means we can rely on what he says and trust what he promises.

When my kids were young, we didn't have a lot. Our finances were very limited and we had to be very careful. So I was very careful about the promises that I made to my children because I never wanted to break a promise. I wanted them to grow up knowing that I'm dependable. That they can trust their dad. That when he makes a promise it's as good as done as far as it's in his ability to do it.

There were many times of course when I wasn't sure whether or not I could make good on something, so I'd say something like, we'll see, or maybe. Those are okay. Those aren't statements that are binding. Sometimes something would happen that would make what we wanted to do impossible. But a promise is a promise and as a dad I had to try my best.

But Jesus, as God in human form; God come to earth, has all the divine attributes of our heavenly Father. He's a dad whose promises are completely reliable. Hebrews 1:3 from the Amplified Bible says *"He [Jesus] is the sole expression of the glory of God [the Light-being, the out-raying or radiance of the divine], and He is the perfect imprint and very image of [God's] nature..."* So Jesus has the same nature and the same heart for us as the Father has, and as the Living Word he always keeps his promises.

There are so many verses in the Bible that tell us how much we can depend on God and how much the Father wants to care for us and protect us. Psalm 46:1-3 says, *"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble"*, That's something you can believe in because God came to us even though we didn't deserve it just as he promised.

Psalm 84:11 says that *"The Lord God is a sun and a shield; and he gives grace and glory; no good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly,"* That's something you can believe in because God came to us just as he promised.

When God says in Isaiah 41:10 *"Do not fear, for I am with you; do not anxiously look around you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand."* That help is something you can believe in because God came to us just as he promised.

Jesus came to Earth to make that all true for us. That's the purpose of the Savior, the Messiah.

The fourth characteristic that Isaiah used to describe the coming Savior is **4. Jesus is Prince of Peace** - That means, **He Gives Me Peace with God** - He has made peace between us. When Isaiah refers to the Savior as the Prince of Peace he's referring specifically to the fact that Jesus has made peace between you and God. Human beings were separated from God because of our disobedience and rebellion. So there's are obstacles that prevent peace between us.

The word translated as peace there is the word shalom. Shalom means more than just peace or an absence of conflict; it is about a complete peace. It denotes a state of contentment, completeness, wholeness, well being and harmony. The root parts of the word mean to be complete, perfect and full.

We have lost our peace. Separated from God we are incomplete - our lives can never have the fullness that God intended. Something had to be done to heal that, but as broken, imperfect people, we're not capable of fixing ourselves. We just fix ourselves broken.

So God came to do something about it.

Before Christ, all we could expect to receive from the Father is the consequences of our sin, our evil choices, our failings and wildly imperfect patterns of thought. But Jesus took upon himself all the wrath of that for you and for me. The punishment and condemnation we earned was poured out on Jesus, the messiah.

That means there's no punishment and condemnation left for those who put their faith in Christ. You never have to worry about punishment and condemnation because Jesus took all of that on himself. He shed his blood to pay the penalty that we deserve. So once you put your faith in Jesus as your Savior trusting in his sacrifice you're reconciled with God. God's not angry with you because of your sin. Jesus has literally made peace between you and the Father.

Look at what the Bible says in Colossians 1:19-20 *“For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [referring to Jesus], and through him to reconcile to himself all things [all things!] whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”*

Don Richardson was a missionary to the Sawi, a tribal people of Western New Guinea, Indonesia. They were known to be cannibalistic headhunters as recently as the 1950s. The Sawi were a ruthless people, constantly at war with the neighboring villages. Being that they valued treachery, deceit and murder highly, many people thought there was no hope to win these people to Christ and get to a place where they were at peace with other people.

However there was a custom among the Sawi called the peace child. The peace child was a baby, born in one village, that would be given to another village as a peace offering. The custom was that, as long as that child was alive, there would be peace between those two villages.

So Don Richardson used this custom as an analogy for the reconciling work of Christ. He told them that Jesus Christ was God's peace child to humanity. And because Christ was resurrected and lives eternally there would always be peace between God and those who put their faith in his child. As a result many of the Sawi came to know Christ as their Savior and a large church flourishes there today. You can read the story of this in Don Richardson's book, "Peace Child"

There was no hope for peace in our lives until Jesus came. Jesus as the Prince of Peace has made peace between you and God and between you and all of God's family. When you believe that you'll find hope everywhere!

So where are you at today? Which of these four qualities did you need to hear or be reminded of? Did you need to be reminded of God's immense caring love for you that is greater than the largest stars or planets in the universe?

Or that Jesus as the mighty God has your situation under control?

Maybe you resonated with the fact that Jesus as the everlasting Father always keeps the promises that he makes to you through his Word.

Or maybe there's some of you here that connected the dots about sin and how Jesus is the peace child for us.

Wherever you are right now, let's take a moment to pray.